
Vale Professor Patrick Wall



Professor Patrick Wall **April 5, 1925 - August 8, 2001**

Professor Patrick Wall changed the way we think about pain. Until the middle of the 20th Century, pain was considered primarily to be a symptom of disease or injury. Pain was classically viewed in terms of a single mechanism consisting of a modality-specific, hard-wired system of nerve fibres running between the periphery and a specific pain centre in the brain. The implication of this view was that pain could only result from clear tissue pathology, with the result that physiotherapy treatment was often directed at the peripheral source of the pain. However, this does not fit with clinical observation, in that there is little correlation between the amount of tissue damage suffered by patients and the degree of pain that they feel.

Patrick Wall was responsible for several critical discoveries that changed the old pain theory and led to substantial changes in pain management. The celebrated gate control theory of pain, published by Wall with Ronald Melzack of McGill University in 1965, transformed the understanding of pain processes and suggested new approaches to the clinical management of patients with severe intractable pain. One of these new therapies for pain was transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, or TENS. Pain can be modulated by widely diverse mechanisms, some of which are activated by a convergence of inputs from the periphery and from surrounding nerve cells; others originate in the brain itself. Wall also demonstrated a rapid physiological reorganisation of central connections

following injury, leading to an appreciation of the plasticity of pain mechanisms and their response to environmental changes.

After receiving his medical degree from Oxford, Patrick Wall moved to America, and worked at Yale, the University of Chicago, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He returned to Britain in 1967 to become Professor of Anatomy and director of the Cerebral Functions Research Group at University College London and remained in this post until his retirement in 1992.

Wall was the first editor-in-chief of the journal *Pain*, the first President of the International Association for the Study of Pain, and published his findings in *The Challenge of Pain* (1982), *The Textbook of Pain* (1983) and more recently in *Pain: The Science of Suffering* (1999).

Patrick Wall was a great ally of physiotherapy. He was a keynote speaker at the 1995 Moving in on Pain conference in Adelaide sponsored by the Physiotherapy Research Foundation, and enthusiastically contributed to a follow-up meeting in Brisbane three years later. He encouraged us to examine critically the role of physiotherapy in the management of pain, particularly the role of movement. Patrick Wall accepted with alacrity an invitation to be one of the inaugural members of the Editorial Advisory Panel of the *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy*. Our profession will miss his support and friendship.

Mary Galea

Chairman, Editorial Board